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ABSTRACT

A desire to raise student achievement levels is leading many educators and parents to work for restructuring and reforming U.S. schools. One of the many areas in which this effort is proving to be complex is the question of changing college admission criteria to respond to the changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that are occurring at the secondary school level. In January 1993 the National Governors' Association convened a meeting of representatives from secondary schools, colleges, and education associations. Although formal recommendations were not developed, there was broad agreement on the following points: (1) educators at all levels must begin a sustained and serious dialog about the overall goals of the education system; (2) pilot projects should be launched to try out new approaches to admission and ultimately to develop a set of model admission criteria; and (3) governors should try to increase public awareness and dialog by offering visible support to reform efforts. Examples are given of some partnerships between school reformers and higher education leaders in Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. An appendix lists seminar participants. (SLD)

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College Admission Standards and School Reform

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National Governors' Association

College Admission Standards and School Reform

Toward a Partnership in Education

by Mary J. Houghton

Education Policy Studies
Center for Policy Research

National Governors' Association

Since their initial meeting in 1908 to discuss interstate water problems, the Governors have worked through the National Governors' Association to deal collectively with issues of public policy and governance. The association's ongoing mission is to support the work of the Governors by providing a bipartisan forum to help shape and implement national policy and to solve state problems.

The members of the National Governors' Association are the Governors of the fifty states, the territories of American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, and the commonwealths of the Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico. The association has a nine-member Executive Committee, a Task Force on State Management, and three standing committees—on Economic Development and Commerce, Human Resources, and Natural Resources. Through NGA's committees, the Governors examine and develop policy and address key state and national issues. Special task forces often are created to focus gubernatorial attention on federal legislation or on state-level issues.

The association works closely with the administration and Congress on state-federal policy issues through its offices in the Hall of the States in Washington, D.C. The association serves as a vehicle for sharing knowledge of innovative programs among the states and provides technical assistance and consultant services to Governors on a wide range of management and policy issues.

The Center for Policy Research is the research and development arm of NGA. The center is a vehicle for sharing knowledge about innovative state activities, exploring the impact of federal initiatives on state government, and providing technical assistance to states. The center works in a number of policy fields, including agriculture and rural development, economic development, education, energy and environment, health, information management, social services, trade, training and employment, and transportation. The priorities for the association's research are set by the Governors.

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Several state and institutional officials were interviewed for the report in order to obtain additional information. Their statements proved extremely valuable.

The contributions of several National Governors' Association staff must be recognized. The activities of this project on college admission standards and school reform were planned and managed under the guidance of Susan Traiman, director of Education Policy Studies, and Jean Graves McDonald, program director for educational improvement. Francine Matthews assisted with the typing of the manuscript. The report was edited by Karen Glass, and Gerry Feinstein managed the publications process.

Executive Summary

Motivated by a desire to raise student achievement levels, local education leaders, principals, teachers, and parents are working on the crucial task of restructuring and reforming America's schools. Some states, school districts, and schools already have implemented changes, and many more are in the planning stages. For example, in Minnesota, a new rule for high school graduation requires demonstrated achievement of learner outcomes rather than completion of courses based on clock hours. In Oklahoma, new statewide core curriculum requirements de-emphasize traditional course requirements and assessments, focusing instead on ensuring that students attain desired outcomes and competencies in numerous subject areas. In Wyoming, performance-based accreditation standards are encouraging school districts to adopt integrated curricula that stress the connections between subjects that previously have been treated as distinct from one another.

The endeavor to change America's education system is proving to be anything but simple. Recently, school reformers have raised concerns about the need for colleges and universities to respond to the changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that are taking place at the secondary level. In particular, the reformers say that by clinging to conventional admission criteria, institutions of higher education are hampering schools' efforts to implement needed changes.

Members of the higher education community, including college admissions officers, admit to feeling wary about some of the changes that are taking place in schools. Reluctant to alter admission policies that they believe have served institutions of higher education well, these individuals advocate a "wait-and-see" approach to the school reform movement. The few that enthusiastically support school reforms fear that admissions offices will be overwhelmed if large numbers of high schools abandon standardized measures of student achievement, such as grades, test scores, and class ranks, in favor of individualized assessments and examples of student work. They argue that if high schools intend to adopt nontraditional transcripts, the schools must find a way to make the admissions officer's job of reviewing these transcripts manageable.

With the debate on this issue still in the early stages, in January 1993 the National Governors' Association convened a meeting of representatives from secondary schools, higher education, and education associations to discuss ways to bring the school reform movement and college admission policies into closer harmony. Although participants did not develop formal recommendations, there was broad agreement among most of those present on three major points.

- First, educators at all levels—elementary, secondary, and higher education—must begin a sustained and serious dialogue about the overall goals of the nation's education system. Colleges and universities must become informed participants in the discussion about school reform.
- Second, pilot projects should be launched to try out new approaches to admission. The ultimate goal of a pilot program would be to develop a set of model admission criteria for students from nontraditional schools that would be applicable on a large scale.
- Third, Governors should work to increase the level of public awareness and dialogue about new approaches to education by offering visible support to schools that are reforming.

There is much reason to hope that the secondary and higher education leaders can effect a joining of purposes. Even now, examples of partnership between school reformers and higher education leaders can be found in a few states.

- Recent revisions to the admission standards for the University of Nebraska system include language that explicitly recognizes and accommodates high school reforms.
- A task force, composed of representatives of the University of Wisconsin system, high schools, school districts, and the state department of public instruction, recently recommended that public institutions of higher education consider establishing a set of alternative admission criteria for students graduating from nontraditional high school programs.
- To accommodate and encourage reform efforts in Wyoming schools, the University of Wyoming recently revised its admission requirements so that applicants must have completed either a specified number of units in various subjects, "or their equivalencies in competency-based outcomes."

Promising efforts such as these offer encouragement that secondary education goals and college admission policies can be made compatible. If there is a desire to create a unified vision of education that will lead the United States into the next century, then a firm commitment to solving this part of the equation must be made.

Introduction

A small comprehensive high school has created a series of multidisciplinary courses that are designed around products created by teams of students. One course combines science, technology, and social studies and has students rebuilding the shut-down shellfish processing facility in their town. Teachers at the school are creating new ways of assessing students, including portfolios, and are talking to college and university admission officers about the implications of these changes for admission policies.

At an urban "alternative" high school located on the campus of a community college, students are enrolled in four seventy-five minute classes each day, with an advisory period three days per week, and electives, taught twice per week, often by members of the professional community. The traditional subject areas have been carefully dismantled. In their place are courses such as humanities and integrated mathematics, and an emphasis on dealing with real issues and problems. Exhibitions and portfolios have replaced traditional pencil-and-paper tests, and "project weeks" give the entire student body a chance to do volunteer work in the outside community.[1]

The American education system is undergoing a revolution. Efforts to reform and restructure schools are underway across the nation, bringing new approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

This report will look at an issue that has emerged as a result of the school reform movement: the relationship between high school reforms and conventional college admission policies and practices. In examining possible barriers

to achieving the National Education Goals, the National Governors' Association (NGA) found that reformers believe that current admission policies at many institutions of higher education inhibit, rather than encourage, their efforts.

The crux of the issue is that although secondary schools are rejecting old distinctions among core classroom subjects and are moving away from traditional curricula and graduation requirements in order to improve student achievement, most colleges and universities are continuing to evaluate applicants on the basis of conventional admission criteria. The trend at colleges over the past decade has been to reinforce and raise admission requirements based on core courses and Carnegie units.[2] The secondary and postsecondary systems are working at cross-purposes.

Consequently, some parents have come to fear that some of the school reforms, by doing away with the kinds of educational performance measures that colleges typically look for, will undermine their children's chances of getting into the college of their choice. To the frustration of school reformers, this parental fear has made it harder to push through some much-needed changes in the schools.

In January 1993, the National Governors' Association brought together thirty leaders from secondary schools, higher education institutions, and education associations to examine the issue in depth and recommend possible solutions. During an intensive, day-and-a-half meeting held January 11 and 12 in Vienna, Virginia, participants discussed their respective views on this important topic. A list of the seminar participants can be found in the Appendix.

As meeting participants began their discussions, two points immediately became apparent. First, attendees noted that by and large the debate on this issue is still at an early stage. People in the education field are beginning to talk about it—among themselves, in community forums involving parents and school administrators and, recently, in workshops and conferences around the country. In addition, articles on the subject are beginning to appear in education journals.[3] However, except in selected communities where bold reform efforts have brought the issue to a head, friction between nonconventional high schools and conventional college admission policies is an anticipated rather than actual problem at this point. This may be because the number of high schools implementing dramatic reforms still is relatively small nationwide.

Second, participants quickly concluded that the nexus between high school reforms and admission policies is only a small part of a broader discussion that is urgently needed among education leaders at all levels—elementary, secon-

dary, and higher education—about the purpose and objectives of America's education system. The debate on needed reforms should not be limited to the elementary and secondary school sectors. There is an urgent need for higher education to begin working with elementary and secondary education to create, as one participant put it, "a seamless web from pre-kindergarten to post-doctorate."

This report elaborates on the dialogue that began during the NGA meeting. It first lays out the many issues involved in the debate between representatives of secondary and higher education. Next, it provides an overview of the school reform movement and of the current trends in college admission. The report then examines some of the promising efforts currently underway to bring college admission requirements into sync with the high school reform movement. Finally, the report presents some ideas and recommendations for the future that emerged from the meeting.

The Debate on School Reform and College Admission

In many instances, state legislatures and departments of education have taken the lead on school reform by passing laws and regulations designed to steer schools away from Carnegie units and toward new, outcomes-based approaches of student assessment.[4] Other examples can be found where school districts and even individual schools have taken the initiative to implement reforms.

Advocates of school reform believe that graduates from innovative schools will be far better prepared than their counterparts at conventional schools to meet the challenges not only of college, but of the complex world they ultimately will inherit. Ironically, however, these graduates actually may face a harder time getting into college because their educational backgrounds and documented competencies do not always conform to the conventionally based admission standards in use at most postsecondary institutions.

For example, what happens to the high school student who studied mathematics and science in an integrated "block" course when he or she applies to a college that strictly requires a specified number of mathematics courses and a specified number of science courses? What happens to students from an innovative school where rank-in-class measurements have been replaced by an expectation that every student master a common set of outcomes or competencies in order to graduate? What happens to the student who can demonstrate competency in critical thinking, persuasive writing, and public speaking, but who did not take the traditional three- or four-year English curriculum required by many colleges? And what happens to the nontraditional high school when it discovers that its students are being rejected from colleges and universities because its performance-based transcripts do not fit the required mold?

In an interview for this report, Beth Weckmueller, director of admissions and executive associate director of enrollment services for the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, noted some of the potential areas of friction between programs at reformed schools and college admission criteria. "If schools look

at teaching across the curriculum and at block scheduling, where they might try to integrate math, science, reasoning, and analytical skills into a single larger block of time, that obviously wreaks havoc with the Carnegie units. . . and if schools go to more of a mastery-based approach and their goal is to have a very large percentage of students achieving all of these competencies by the time they graduate, how do you translate that into a rank in class? If we can say that all of that school's students are ending up at this point, how do you translate that into a nice old bell-shaped curve?"

The View of Reformers: Colleges Must Adjust

Although some high schools have opted to maintain conventional transcripts even while instituting reforms, many people involved in the school reform movement strongly believe that colleges and universities have a responsibility to develop alternative admission criteria for students graduating from innovative schools. Participants at the NGA meeting contributed to the growing chorus demanding that higher education be more responsive to, and supportive of, the changes taking place in high schools.

"We want clear, concise writers, critical thinkers, and problem solvers," said Sharon Lloyd Clark, director of the Institute for Secondary Education and a participant at the NGA meeting. "To get this, we need school reform. The structure of schools makes change difficult; teachers also can be reluctant. So can students, who may fear working harder and taking control of their education. The leverage of college admission is important. A support system should be in place for schools that reform."

Another NGA meeting attendee, Massachusetts Secretary of Education Piedad Robertson, said, "We're dealing with college admission standards here—how colleges can be in touch with what is happening in schools in the state and how they can be responsive to changes in measuring accomplishment. Members of the higher education community need to understand and respond to what's happening in schools, and they need to create flexibility within their admission standards."

Kati Haycock, director of the Education Roundtable and School/College Trust at the American Association for Higher Education, added, "Kids in this country don't know nearly what they need to know. This effort in K through 12 is a genuine effort to change all that. We want to tell kids what we've hidden: that there are things we care about having them learn. Higher education also can learn from K through 12."

"This is a serious effort to make clear what we expect kids to learn," said Haycock. "It's an effort to be honest

with kids. It has to be a joint effort. One system can't do it alone. . . . The problem is that higher education isn't at the table in the K through 12 reform movement. It's a mutual responsibility."

"We need to broaden the responsibility for lifelong learning, which calls for increased dialogue between K through 12 and higher education. There is no hope for reforming K through 12 unless colleges respond," said Peter Robertson, a teacher at Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, who also attended the NGA meeting.

The message from representatives of the high school side of the debate is clear: if reforms are to take root and grow, they must be actively nourished and supported by higher education.

The Higher Education Response

How have colleges and universities responded so far? With a few notable exceptions, the answer is not well.

Beth Weckmueller described the negative reaction of University of Wisconsin admissions directors and registrars in early 1992 when they were first briefed on the reforms taking place in a few Wisconsin schools. "The reaction on the part of many—most—of the admissions directors was, 'No, no. Forget it. What's wrong with what we're doing now? This is another fad. This is terrible!'"

"The big threat [by higher education] is always, 'Well, if you're not going to give us normal-looking grades and if you're not going to give us rank in class and so on, then we'll just look at the ACT and SAT scores,'" said Weckmueller. "And that obviously was not music to the ears of the high schools involved."

Stanley Henderson, director of enrollment management and admissions at Western Michigan University, described a similar reaction on the part of a group of public university admissions officers at a 1993 meeting of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "Their reaction was, 'What do you mean you're going to do away with Carnegie units?' They seemed uninformed about and resistant to the reform movement," said Henderson in an interview for this report.

Admissions officers have legitimate concerns about the impact of school reforms on admission requirements. Above all, they are quick to point out that they simply do not have the time to look that closely at each applicant. Faced with reviewing thousands of applications in a few short weeks, admissions officers assert that they have no other choice than to rely on standardized indicators of high school achievement: grades, class rankings, fulfillment of Carnegie units, and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test-

ing (ACT) scores. This system, which allows admissions offices to impose eligibility cutoffs and organize applicant pools into neat, bell-shaped curves, has served admissions offices well, and they are extremely reluctant to change.

Representatives of colleges and universities at the NGA meeting described the bind that school reforms could put them in. "I get nervous when we talk about removing my ability to rank applicants. In a highly selective, publicly supported system, the need to rank applicants is a must," said Zina Jacque, a special assistant in the office of the president of the University of California at Berkeley. "We need to discuss what a student needs to learn—what he or she must know—to be able to successfully compete. So far our discussion has centered on removing those things from a high school record that enhance my ability to quickly assess how a student has done—grades and so forth. High schools need to make sure an admissions officer can review a transcript and know who has done extraordinarily well, who has done moderately well, and who has barely gotten by."

Michael Behnke, director of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), echoed these concerns. "Admissions officers are very dependent on fair, external, objective assessments. SATs are the best predictor of success at MIT—better than high school grades." Behnke made the interesting point that at least at his institution, standardized measures also are needed for the purpose of providing consumer information. "People want to know what our statistics look like—even bond agencies need the information for bond ratings. Admissions officers have to justify their decisions to various constituencies and they can't do that without national assessments."

Lee R. Kerschner, interim president of California State University at Stanislaus, was candid about the reality of the admission process in California. "Most of our universities don't give individual attention to the individual when admitting. We don't really look. It's mechanistic. We select—by law—from the upper one-third of high school students, with the upper third based on quantitative achievement and grades. . . . I don't see us sitting down and reading an application portfolio for every student. First of all, we will never be funded to perform that task for all applicants."

"Admissions officers are put in a very difficult spot," added Kerschner, comparing the admissions officer's job to that of a personnel officer for a large corporation. "CEOs always say that they want readers and writers. But then their personnel officers don't abide—they look for courses in accounting because they have no measures of reading and

writing skills. It's the same in the university. The university has rhetoric about what it wants, while the admissions officers have to triage the applicant pool. Rhetoric and actual admissions officers' behavior are not always in sync."

A more troubling concern is that many people in the higher education community are not convinced that school reforms will produce better high school graduates. Some are openly skeptical.

"If I thought the outcomes-based movement were valid, we'd adjust," said Kerschner. "But I see it as a fad. People think it will solve lots of problems. I don't. I would lead the battle if I did. . . . This discussion about outcomes assessment may be useful. It may help public schools do a better job. But so many issues are far more important."

Kerschner acknowledged the need to improve the preparation of high school students, but he argued that this could be done without abandoning conventional structures. In California, he said, "People are deeply involved in the question of how to teach math, with profound impact on the curriculum. The content of courses is changing, though the content is still being taught in the context of three Carnegie units of math. What we're trying to do is to produce a better high school product. The structure of high school can be the same, but the content and expectations for students in those courses can, should, and is being changed."

Such skepticism, combined with the practical difficulty admissions officers see in adapting admission criteria to accommodate school reforms, has led many in the higher education community to advocate a "wait-and-see" approach to the reform movement. "Higher education people are saying that they will hang back and watch how the reform movement develops, then change later if it becomes compelling," observed NGA meeting moderator Patrick M. Callan.

Callan, who is the executive director of the California Higher Education Policy Center, observed that one reason colleges may not support school reforms is because they really do not know much about the theories and ideas behind the reform movement. "Higher education representatives, at least many of them, are much less comfortable with even the discussion of outcomes-based approaches. The conversation about these new approaches has not progressed as far in higher education, and that, in turn, means that colleges and universities have less experience and confidence in the idea."

Finally, some conferees pointed out that legal regulations and equity concerns reinforce the need for objective admission criteria. They contend that the gains made in affirmative action during recent decades must not be threatened by moves to more subjective measures.

However, a focus on outcomes-based education is not confined to the elementary and secondary sectors of education; discussions are beginning to take place in higher education about a performance-based approach to college coursework. For example, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia issued a report in January 1993, *Change and Improvement in Virginia Higher Education: a Preliminary Report to the Governor and General Assembly*, which states that in the 1990s the higher education system should begin to develop competency-based degree programs. The report suggests that colleges and universities will move away from awarding credit based on "seat time" or time spent in the classroom and toward a system that focuses on what the student has learned and can do at the end of the education process.

Parents: Caught in the Middle

Caught in the middle of this debate, parents often find themselves in the uncomfortable position of resisting high school reform efforts out of fear that their children will not get into the college of their choice if the local school strays too far from convention. Parents whose children have done well in a conventional high school setting are particularly apt to be wary of reforms.

In one case cited by a participant at the NGA meeting, a school that was in the process of reforming ultimately was forced to abandon the effort because of parent opposition. "Parents became concerned about whether transcripts coming out of these kinds of schools would be adequate to get kids into colleges. The school now has folded back into a traditional model, largely because of the worries of parents who wanted their kids to get into the best colleges," said Lois Easton of the Education Commission of the States.

For those committed to education reform, as are the Governors, the question ultimately arises, "How can the gap between admission policies and high school reforms be bridged?" Many people believe that the answer lies with a partnership between the secondary and higher education communities. From the NGA meeting, the following voices were heard.

Lois Easton, with the Education Commission of the States, said, "It's a matter of both entities getting together and agreeing on what students should learn. . . . It is a scary notion that higher education will wait to see how this reform stuff shakes out. Higher education needs to build it with the reformers. For me, it's a new way of thinking about ourselves. We're not two systems, but one system working together."

Massachusetts Secretary of Education Piedad Robertson said, "How do we make the higher education community aware that there needs to be flexibility in the way it approaches students? An admission mechanism should be considered that judges students not only by test scores, but also evaluates the entire potential of each and every student. It's hard for admissions officers, who have thousands of applications to review, to choose the longer and more complex admission procedure. But maybe there's a way, through partnership between higher education and K through 12, to clarify and facilitate an alternative admission procedure. We cannot operate separately."

Sharon Lloyd Clark, of the Institute for Secondary Education, said, "We need partnership."

The School Reform Movement: Examples From the Field

Examples of high school reform can be found in all regions of the United States. Although the number of fully restructured schools still is relatively small, the fact that several states are now moving in this direction on a statewide level suggests that potentially large numbers of students will in a few years be graduating from fully reformed schools. The examples in this chapter illustrate some of the changes currently underway.

Minnesota: A New Graduation Rule Based on Outcomes

Minnesota recently developed a graduation rule intended to ensure consistent, uniformly high expectations for high school graduates. The rule requires "demonstrated achievement of learner outcomes rather than completion of courses based on clock hours," a synopsis by the Minnesota Department of Education explains.

Under the result-oriented system, students will be expected to demonstrate both "content outcomes"—the essential knowledge, concepts, principles, and processes needed to make sense of new information and complex situations—and "exit outcomes"—the generic abilities related to thinking, organization, and communication that transcend content. A recent draft of the rule calls for "total latitude" on how to implement the state outcome standards at the local level.

The state board of education will set performance standards for all content and exit outcomes listed in the graduation rule, which is scheduled to go into effect for grades kindergarten through nine at the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year. Students will graduate when they meet or exceed the standards for the content and exit outcomes. Over the next few years, the state will help local educators design assessment processes to measure student achievement of the state performance standards.

Oklahoma: Toward a Competency-Based Curriculum

In 1990, the Oklahoma legislature passed a law directing the state department of education to establish a core curriculum in order to ensure that students attain desired competencies in numerous subject areas. The new curriculum, which subsequently was adopted by the department of education and will go into effect statewide at the start of the 1993-1994 school year, lists some 7,000 "learner outcomes-state competencies." Broken down by grade—for grades one through twelve—the outcomes and competencies cover language arts; mathematics; reading; science; social studies, including government and history; comprehensive health and physical education; computer education; foreign languages; and the arts. As part of a process to refine the lengthy list and make it more "user friendly," in April 1993 the state board of education adopted a set of "priority academic student skills" (PASS) for grades five, eight, and eleven.

"We got away from specific Carnegie units for core courses. With the outcomes, what we want is for teachers to be teaching a constant thread through all the different courses," said a staff member for the Oklahoma House of Representatives' Education Committee.

Accompanying the Oklahoma curriculum reforms is a new form of assessment, called "basic criterion-referenced testing." The criterion-referenced tests will evaluate students' mastery of the state's new competencies and outcomes. In addition, the state is redesigning the teacher education system and hopes to implement an outcomes-driven system within the next three years.

Wyoming: An End to Carnegie Units

Under another statewide reform initiative, Wyoming has adopted performance-based accreditation standards for elementary and secondary school programs. Enacted by the legislature in 1990, the initiative does not establish a statewide curriculum, but requires school districts to adopt curricula and educational practices based on the accreditation standards.

Judy Minier, director of the school improvement unit within the Wyoming Department of Education, described the new standards. "People are looking to implement instructional practices that include authentic tasks for students. We will be assessing performance—what it is students actually do in the core curriculum areas and the core knowledge areas." The accreditation document does not spell out exactly how the districts must implement the changes, "but it im-

plies that there will be new approaches, such as greater interdisciplinary instruction, team teaching, a move away from grade-level expectations, and other kinds of educational restructuring."

As in Oklahoma, the reforms represent a definite move away from Carnegie units, which Minier criticized as "locking people into old paradigms." She explained, "The accreditation document doesn't mention them, which means that they are not a requirement, nor are they an expectation. We don't want them because that's not what we're concerned with any longer," she said, adding, "We want secondary programs to be much more integrative in nature and to show less reliance on 'seat time' in a single discipline."

Coalition of Essential Schools

In addition to these and other statewide reforms, 139 schools nationwide have joined the Coalition of Essential Schools, an organization that promotes school reform and restructuring efforts. (Another 336 schools are planning to join the coalition or are exploring membership.) Coalition schools are implementing new practices based on the organization's "nine common principles," which focus on helping students master a limited number of essential skills and areas of knowledge, rather than learn a broad swath of content in conventionally defined subjects.

At one of these schools, Parkway South High School in Manchester, Missouri, teachers and administrators have worked over the past four years to introduce reforms. They have outlined the knowledge and skills that students must master in order to graduate, developed new forms of assessment by which students can demonstrate their mastery, and adjusted their teaching approaches and curricula to help students meet the higher expectations. The reforms are being phased in gradually. Eventually, students will be required to develop a portfolio of materials that demonstrates they have acquired the various proficiencies, which include communication, critical thinking, and problemsolving skills; national and international awareness; an understanding of the interrelationship of science, technology, and society; artistic creation and interpretation; and personal and social development.

Current Admission Policies

What do current admission policies look like? The answer lies with each college or university. Because admission requirements vary from institution to institution, it is likely that a nonconventional high school transcript will receive different treatment by different admissions offices. At a handful of highly selective private colleges, admission requirements are somewhat flexible. Admissions officers are accustomed to reading each application carefully and considering the full range of a student's accomplishments, including nonacademic activities, personal characteristics, and performance in nonconventional academic environments. A student from a nontraditional high school is not likely to run into difficulty when applying to such a college.

At Yale University, for example, the first criterion for admission is evidence of ability to do successful academic work. A diversity of interests, background, and special talents also is sought. No prescribed high school program is required, though potential applicants are encouraged to take the richest possible mix of academic offerings. The admissions office also values, but does not require, honors work at the secondary level, SAT verbal and mathematics scores in the 500 to 800 range, and a high degree of accomplishment in a nonacademic area. Similarly, at Oberlin College, admissions officers consider the applicant's school achievement record, school and community leadership activities, recommendations, interviews, and test scores. Certain units of high school preparation are recommended but are not strictly required.

A nonconventional transcript is more likely to pose a problem at a college or university that adheres to rigid cutoffs and criteria. For example, at the University of California at Berkeley, only the top 12.5 percent of California high school graduates are eligible for admission; out-of-state applicants must meet an even tougher eligibility cutoff. Furthermore, applicants to the Berkeley campus—as at all University of California campuses—must have a minimum of fifteen Carnegie units of high school preparation. At Berkeley, which recom-

mends nineteen units total, admission criteria include four units in English, two to three in a foreign language, three to four in mathematics, one to three in science, one in American history, and four more from at least two specified areas. The mathematics units must include one unit of algebra, one of geometry, and one of intermediate algebra, trigonometry, or a higher level course.

These kinds of admission criteria based on Carnegie units and conventionally defined subject areas are common at public colleges and universities throughout the United States. A student from a nontraditional school might have difficulty gaining admission at such institutions.

Basic Admission Information

Despite the varied nature of specific admission requirements nationwide, there is surprising uniformity in the types of information the majority of colleges and universities look for. According to a 1986 report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "Almost all colleges, regardless of their selectivity, ask prospective students to submit a high school transcript with grades and class rank as a part of their procedures for admission."[5] The foundation found that at all but one of twenty-nine colleges and universities studied, which were selected to represent the full spectrum of institutional types, the most important criteria for college admission were a core of required courses, grade point average, and rank in class. The other commonly used criterion was student scores on standardized tests.

There is a reason why college admissions officers rely so heavily on these parameters of student achievement. Although they may limit what an officer learns about the individual behind each application, measures such as grade point averages, rank in class, and test scores allow the person reviewing applications to compare and rank applicants against a set of standardized admission criteria. Not only does this make the huge job of evaluating thousands of applications manageable, but it is widely believed that standardization is the only sure guarantee that admissions offices will reach unbiased, equitable decisions on whom to admit.

The process involved in revising admission requirements also varies from institution to institution. In states where individual public colleges and universities can set their own admission requirements, the battle over admission policies, though potentially bitter, is internal and relatively small scale. However, where admission policies are set by the state and implemented statewide—as in Colorado—the debate is likely to be much broader and more complex, with numerous constituencies vying for control.

The Trend Toward Higher Admission Standards

Current admission policies reflect a trend over the past decade toward raising admission standards. Faced during the 1970s with increasing numbers of students who came to college inadequately prepared, colleges moved during the early 1980s to tighten admission standards and make it clearer to college-bound high school students what was expected of them. According to a 1986 report by the Carnegie Foundation, from 1979 to 1985, the number of public colleges requiring at least one course in English jumped from 56 percent to 76 percent, while the number requiring a course in mathematics rose from 51 percent to 61 percent.[6] (The report notes that admission requirements at private colleges and universities, which on average had always been higher than those of public institutions, were relatively steady during the period.)

A December 1992 report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, *Raising Standards: State Policies to Improve Academic Preparation for College*, documented a similar trend.[7] The report noted that twenty states have either created or changed their admission requirements since 1986. Eight states required students to complete coursework in specified subject matter; three others merely encouraged students to take recommended courses. Seven states increased the required number of courses in particular subjects or added foreign language or other requirements such as computer science. Seven additional states took action on the grade point average required for admission or created or increased the minimum ACT or SAT scores required for admission.

The trend toward raising admission standards is based on the theory that college admission standards have a strong influence on high school curricula (i.e., that they "drive" high school programs). Fed up with having to provide remedial courses for growing numbers of entering freshmen, higher education institutions believe that stricter admission standards will lead to better qualified applicants and a stronger student body. Having fought hard to revise admission standards during the 1980s, some college admissions offices are extremely reluctant to overhaul their policies again to accommodate high school reform efforts, especially since they are not convinced that the kinds of reforms being adopted are the most effective.

Some argue that students need incentives to work hard in high school. Currently, most high school graduates can be admitted to nearly all institutions of higher education except for the most elite institutions. In a September 2, 1992, editorial in *The Washington Post*, Robert J. Samuelson states that nearly 70

percent of four-year college and university freshmen attend the university of their choice.[8] According to Samuelson, "Today's low standards tell high school students: You don't have to work hard to go to college."

Referring to the movement to beef up admission requirements, the Carnegie Foundation said, "Clarifying standards for admission is a move in the right direction. But what we find troubling is that the focus is on credits, not on content; little attention is being paid to what is being learned. College-bound students are asked to take another course in English, or science, or mathematics, but educators are not asking what's behind the label. More English, yes, but which English? More history, but what is most worth knowing? What is it that colleges believe students need to know and understand as well as be able to do?"[9]

The problem is not that colleges do not want to see improvements in high school education; they just have different opinions on how to induce such changes. Theories about college admission and theories about school reform are working at cross-purposes. There is an urgent need for the secondary and higher education communities to begin working together.

Emerging Partnerships

Is there a way for school reformers and higher education leaders to find a common ground? At first glance, it would appear that the two sides are at an impasse, with each convinced that the other is headed in the wrong direction. Yet there are a few glimmers of hope that the current tensions could give way to a joining of purposes. This chapter describes four promising efforts on the part of secondary and higher education leaders to address the conflict between college admission standards and high school reform.

Nebraska: Statewide Policy Revision Recognizes School Reforms

In keeping with the trend nationwide, the Nebraska Board of Regents in early 1993 raised admission standards for the University of Nebraska system. Like many other statewide policies, Nebraska's new entrance standards identify core course requirements, expressed in terms of Carnegie units, and clarify which courses may be used to satisfy the requirements. However, unlike recent revisions in most other states, the new Nebraska admission standards include a section that explicitly recognizes and accommodates high school reforms. The passage reads:

> It is recognized that many high school systems are developing new approaches for assessing student learning outcomes, including those based on the demonstration of specific competencies. The university will put in place mechanisms involving high school personnel, so that the university may accommodate any future movement toward outcomes-based education. This may require the definition of alternative paths to satisfying the core course requirements for admission.

The new standards will become fully effective for all undergraduate students admitted to the university for the 1997-98 academic year. In the meantime, the university intends to name a joint high school-university

task force to continue to study the issue of competency-based education in Nebraska schools.

Wisconsin: A Willingness to Look for Alternatives

After initially scoffing at the idea of school reform, many higher education leaders in Wisconsin now are expressing a willingness to accommodate restructured high schools in the admission process, according to Beth Weckmueller, director of admissions and executive associate director of enrollment services for the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

The shift in attitude resulted from the work of a task force convened in the fall of 1992 to study the issue of school reform and college admission. The task force, which included representatives of University of Wisconsin institutions, high schools, school districts, and the state department of public instruction, has reached a consensus that the University of Wisconsin system "should be supporting high school reforms and not working against them," said Weckmueller.

According to Weckmueller, a preliminary report developed by the task force suggests that public institutions in Wisconsin should look into establishing a set of admission criteria that could be used by students coming from a variety of nontraditional high school programs; the criteria would not replace current requirements but would serve as an alternative admission channel for students who needed such a pathway. The president of the University of Wisconsin System, Katharine Lyall, and the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents are expected to accept the task force recommendations and direct the university system to develop the alternative criteria, Weckmueller said.

"Really what happened was they put the high school and the college people together in a room and they reached a consensus," said Weckmueller. "Apparently they all came out and felt quite positive about it."

Yet Weckmueller suggested that even with the new spirit of cooperation, the task of developing new criteria that meet the needs of both nontraditional schools and university admissions offices may not be easy. "The rub, I think, is that some of the high schools have been looking at very innovative methods of assessing students, for example, portfolios, samples collected over time, and lengthy narrative assessments of their work. It is all very positive, but the universities, with some justification I think, are saying that they can't deal with this—just the volume. It's simply not practical for schools to send us reams and sheaves of paper on these students. We still

need to discriminate—legally—about who gets in. We have more applicants than we can take. We know that some students coming out of high school are not as well prepared as others, and we need something measurable we can use to sort out the applicants to admit those we want."

She added, "I think the issue now is to try and find some other kinds of performance measures that can be reported by high schools that will serve colleges' purposes at least as well as the current measures."

Although it may take some time for Wisconsin educators to develop alternative performance measures and admission criteria, the mere fact that secondary and higher education leaders have agreed that the effort is necessary puts Wisconsin ahead of most other states. It is a significant step in the right direction.

Wyoming: New Admission Policy Makes Room for Alternative Transcripts

One of the most exciting efforts to clear the path for college-bound graduates of innovative high schools is taking place in Wyoming. After the Wyoming Department of Education instituted performance-based accreditation standards for elementary and secondary programs in 1990, local curriculum directors, whose job it was to adopt curricula based on the new standards, became concerned that colleges and universities would not accept students from innovative schools, according to Judy Minier, director of the school improvement unit within the Wyoming Department of Education.

During a statewide review of admission standards, the following issues emerged.

- Many Wyoming high schools organize their curricula around integrated instruction in language arts rather than English. Many excellent courses with an emphasis on writing could be found in communications and speech courses as well as in integrated language arts courses.
- Students often could meet high school graduation requirements for mathematics courses but could not meet expectations for pre-college preparation in mathematics.

In April 1993, to accommodate and encourage needed reforms, the University of Wyoming Board of Trustees revised its admission requirements so that applicants must have completed either a specified number of units in various subjects, "or their equivalencies in competency-based outcomes."

"It's a real breakthrough," said Minier. "The new policy frees up secondary programs to develop alternative transcripts, performance-based stand-

ards descriptions, or any other format that secondary schools would like to adopt to indicate what their students have mastered."

Minier noted that the new policy was controversial. "The board of trustees asked questions such as: 'What is outcomes-based education? How do you know what students have done? And if we can't understand it very well, how can parents understand it?' But it was approved."

She added, "That doesn't mean they'll never bring it up again. But I think we have convinced them that this is good for secondary and postsecondary education."

Statement of the Coalition of Essential Schools

The Coalition of Essential Schools is beginning to build a network of colleges and universities that are willing to look carefully at students from innovative schools. As of April 1993, the presidents and directors of admissions from twenty-four institutions had signed a coalition-drafted statement of support for schools undergoing reforms.[10] The statement reads:

> We the undersigned support and affirm the work of educational reform currently underway in schools across America. Ours is a time which calls for the ambitious redesign of schools, and we recognize that institutions of higher education must be partners in bringing forth the changes so urgently needed. We applaud those schools involved in endeavors which emphasize rigorous independent thinking and the direct engagement of students in serious work, and we commend their efforts to find effective means to restructure and improve education at all levels. We welcome applications from students at such schools.

The colleges and universities that signed the statement are all private; nearly all fall into the category of institutions that already strive to make a careful and informed reading of student applications. Although the signing of the statement by these institutions represents little more than an affirmation of policies that already are in place, nevertheless it could prove valuable as a means to build momentum for meaningful admission reforms at other types of institutions.

The Road Ahead: Ideas From the NGA Meeting

Today in America there is widespread consensus that school reform is necessary. There also is a growing recognition that higher education must become a partner in that movement. Institutions of higher education must not only contribute their ideas, support, and energy to the cause of school reform, but they also must subject themselves to the same tough scrutiny that elementary and secondary schools have undergone.

By bringing together key players to discuss the issue of high school reform and college admission, the National Governors' Association hoped to spark a dialogue that will lead to greater cooperation between secondary and higher education leaders. The ardent view of many of the NGA meeting participants that all levels must engage in a broad discussion about education reform embodied a recognition that secondary education goals and college admission policies must be made compatible. If there is a desire to create a unified vision of education that will lead America into the next century, then a firm commitment to solving this part of the equation must be made.

Although participants at the NGA meeting did not develop any formal recommendations about what should be done to bring the school reform movement and college admission policies into harmony, there was broad agreement among most of those present on the following three points.

- The issue of high school reform and college admission offers an important opportunity for educators at all levels—elementary, secondary, and higher education—to begin a sustained and serious dialogue about the overall goals of the nation's education system. College and university officials must become informed participants in the discussion about strategies to achieve the National Education Goals. They must consider not only the ways in which they might accommodate and support high school reforms, but also assess whether a shift to performance-based approaches might benefit their own institutions.

- Speculation, rumors, and fear about the impact of school reforms on conventional college admission processes must be replaced by concrete information gleaned from real-life experience with alternative admission criteria. Several meeting participants suggested that pilot projects be launched, preferably in every state, to try out new approaches to admission. The ultimate goal of the pilot program would be to develop a set of model admission criteria for students from nontraditional schools that would be applicable on a large scale.
- Governors should work to increase the level of public awareness and dialogue about performance-based education by offering visible support to schools that are pursuing reforms. The discussion about education reform should not stop at the doors of schools and colleges. Parents and society at large must be informed about the theories and practices involved in school reform and invited to become partners in the effort to improve America's schools.

Endnotes

1. Information for this scenario was provided by the Coalition of Essential Schools, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.
2. Developed in 1892 by a group of college and university educators, the Carnegie unit system is used by institutions of higher education to measure a high school student's academic preparation. A Carnegie unit represents one unit of instruction—typically a year-long course—in a given subject.
3. See, for examples, the following articles: Robert Rothmans, "Testing Shifts from Memorization to Investigation in Littleton, Colorado," *Education Week*, vol. XII, no. 31 (April 22, 1992) and Sharon Lloyd Clark, "Restructured Schools Need Advocate in College Admission," *State Education Leader*, vol. 11, no. 2 (fall 1992).
4. Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1986).
5. Boyer.
6. Boyer.
7. Patricia A. Flanagan, *Raising Standards: State Policies to Improve Academic Preparation for College* (Rockville, Md.: Westat, Inc., December 1992).
8. Robert J. Samuelson, "The Low State of Higher Ed," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 1992.
9. Boyer.
10. The statement was signed by officials at Amherst College, Bard College, Bennington College, Brown University, Bryn Mawr College, Columbia University, Connecticut College, Dartmouth College, Hampshire College, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the Johns Hopkins University, Lafayette College, Lehigh University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mills College, Mount Holyoke College, Sarah Lawrence College, Simmons College, Smith College, the University of Chicago, the University of Denver, Wellesley College, Wesleyan University, and Williams College.

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